

Key Questions for Researchers Requesting Approval from the VDSS Institutional Review Board

Because the primary purpose of the VDSS Institutional Review Board (IRB) is to protect the privacy and confidentiality of VDSS clients, the key question for the IRB to consider in reviewing a data request is:

What individual identifying information will the researcher need to conduct their research?

Examples of identifying information include name, address, date of birth, social security number, and VDSS client identification number. Providing such information can adversely affect VDSS clients' privacy and confidentiality. If a researcher can avoid or minimize the need for individual identifying information, obtaining IRB approval will likely be easier.

Researchers often request identifying information in order to select their sample. For example, a researcher may intend to conduct a survey of certain VDSS clients and may need names and contact information for clients in order to request their participation in the survey. As another example, a researcher may want clients' addresses to match them to Census tracts.

It is important, therefore, that researchers describe how they intend to select the sample of individuals for their research. What individual identifying information is needed? In addition to the principal investigator, who will have access to the identifying information?

Even if researchers intend to obtain written informed consent from sample members, if they also need identifying information in order to select the sample *before they obtain informed consent*, privacy and confidentiality concerns exist.

Similarly, even if a researcher does not need identifying information for the analysis portion of their study and intends to destroy the identifying information after selecting the sample, privacy and confidentiality concerns still exist.

In order to obtain IRB approval, researchers must address these issues in writing. It would also be helpful for researchers to discuss proposed sample sizes and to provide drafts of any survey instruments.

(11/17/05)